

VZCZCXRO9945
OO RUEHPA
DE RUEHFN #0343 1991511
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
O 171511Z JUL 08
FM AMEMBASSY FREETOWN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2048
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

S E C R E T FREETOWN 000343

SIPDIS

DS/IP, DS/CC, AF/W, INL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/17/2027
TAGS: [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SL](#) [SNAR](#)
SUBJECT: UPDATE ON SIERRA LEONE DRUG SEIZURE

REF: FREETOWN 336

Classified By: RSO Bryan Scruggs for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (S) To date, there have been at least 17 arrests made in connection with the 730 kg of cocaine seized in the early hours of Sunday morning, July 13. The General Manager of Lungi Airport and other airport employees are among those that have been taken into custody. The eight individuals initially arrested on Sunday night, including one U.S. citizen (reftel), are still considered primary suspects in the investigation and have been isolated from other detainees. They are currently being held in Pademba prison in Freetown. The road in front of the prison has been blocked off to vehicular traffic and a substantial increase in armed police personnel has been placed at the location.

12. (S) Police are currently looking for a Sierra Leonean national who is believed to be heavily involved in the shipment of the seized drugs. Sierra Leone security forces have established check-points in Freetown and throughout the country in an effort to find this individual and to identify other potential suspects. There have been numerous reports of vehicles containing multi-nationals, to include Americans, being stopped and questioned at police check-points. One American was detained for 12 hours then released without charge on July 14. For over a year, Sierra Leone has been stopping individuals from neighboring countries, particularly those found near border areas. Since the July 13 interdiction, stopping non-diplomatic foreigners has increased dramatically.

13. (S) As the Government of Sierra Leone (GOSL) comes to grips with this situation, President Koroma has taken direct charge of the investigation as of July 16. We note that requests by the Embassy Consular officer to visit the arrested American citizen have been refused to date until July 18. Sierra Leone's Attorney General cited the need to investigate the matter more thoroughly, as the reason for not allowing visitation. However, the Foreign Minister promised Ambassador Perry on July 16, that the Embassy's Consular Officer would be allowed to visit the U.S Citizen on Friday. The Ambassador has been speaking or seeing the Foreign Minister twice daily both for updates and to reinforce request for Consular visit; a meeting later today is also scheduled. In a July 17 discussion with the British High Commissioner (BHC), the Ambassador learned that the UK team here to assist the GOSL was held at Lungi Airport for a lengthy period the night of July 16. The BHC Sarah Mackintosh (protect) also said that she perceived the GOSL was "over compensating" and taking restrictive actions; SOP's were not being applied because the government seems overwhelmed by this case. We concur that the government is even suspicious, it seems, of those who are trying to help.

14. (S) Sunday's seizure, the largest in Sierra Leone's history, has presented some challenges for the GOSL as they are feeling their way through what to do next. The GOSL requested investigative and forensic assistance from UK's

Serious Organized Crime Agency (SOCA). The Sierra Leone Police (SLP) are focusing all of their resources into this matter and according to a senior UN Police advisor, the SLP is doing a commendable job with the investigation but, as noted above, the GOSL seems to be over cautious. We note also this government is new and not well versed in standard bilateral protocols.

15. (U) Post will continue to monitor the situation and provide updates as they develop.
PERRY